

Students cross paths in cultural interchange

Mercy serves as host to Argentinian contingent

BY TIM SMITH
STAFF WRITER

Not long after Carolina Olivera and five schoolmates from a Sisters of Mercy school near Buenos Aires, Argentina, arrived in Detroit for an exchange program with Farmington Hills-based Mercy High School, they found out just how different American life really is. "All the teenagers have cars," said Olivera, 17, of St. Ethnea School, lamenting the fact that Argentinians cannot legally drive until reaching age 18. In the South America country, teens spell transportation problems.

And outlet malls in Argentina don't compare to sprawling retail smorgasbords such as at Birch Run — which was the destination of one of the group's recent field trips, said Maria "Cookie" Zorrilla, hosted by Mercy's Emily Crissey of Plymouth. "They're not as big."

Their suburban Detroit hosts are also learning quite a bit about Argentinians, too. "When they first got off the plane and hugged us and kissed us, that was kind of different," said Olivera's host, Mercy student Asia Johnson of Southfield. "It was nice, but very surprising ... I guess they are more open and more affectionate toward others. When we see somebody, it's like, 'Hi!'"

Johnson also couldn't believe her guests' different eating habits: cookies for breakfast, pancakes for dessert and Frosted Flakes for a late-night snack.

During a roundtable discussion of the "cultural interchange" last week at Mercy, such comments drew laughter from native and visitors alike. After just two weeks, it's clear that a bond is definitely strengthening.

In fact, before returning to Argentina on Feb. 28, the 12 students are planning on hopping on a train and going to Chicago to celebrate the 18th birthday of

Milagros Newbery, who is being hosted at the Plymouth home of Mercy student Vanessa Rennels.

Hospitality and hoops

The Sisters of Mercy mission has something to do with the connection, said Mercy High School principal Sister Regina Doelker. "The Mercy values are very much alive in both schools. Hospitality is one of our main characteristics."

Erica Silagay of Novi, who is hosting Laura Fuentes, summed up the experience this way. "They learn English from us, we learn Spanish from them. We learn about their culture. So we'll know what to expect when we go down there" in June.

Helping set the stage was a pen pal program begun last year between the two Sisters of Mercy schools, both with more than 900 students. St. Ethnea is all-Catholic, but Mercy's student body includes about 25 percent who are from other religious denominations.

But when the Argentinians arrived at Detroit Metropolitan Airport, following a daylong flight, the foreign teens found out that the spoken word was somewhat different from the back-and-forth letters. And these are youngsters who began learning English in the fourth grade.

"When we first came here," Zorrilla said, "they (Americans) were talking real fast. But now we're getting accustomed to it."

Meanwhile, the program is showing students that similarities also exist between the two cultures — and the people.

Fuentes said the Argentinians are comfortable with the Mercy students simply because there are similarities between the schools. "Perhaps that's because the (Mercy) nuns keep traveling back and forth."

Another visitor, 17-year-old Anabel Gonzalez, said one benefit of spending time at Mercy is



STAFF PHOTO BY TASHA MITCHELL

Learning group: "Cookie" Zorrilla (left), Maria Maciel (center) and Carolina Olivera share a moment at Mercy High School. They are exchange students from Argentina attending Mercy High School.

learning about non-Catholics.

"It's very important to experience a school with students of different religions, because in Argentina, at our school, we are all Catholics," said Gonzalez, the guest of Mercy student Katie Garagiola.

Gonzalez also discovered another difference between the schools. "Classrooms are different in Argentina. Students stay in the room and the teachers change. Here, the students move from class to class."

Away from school, Garagiola and Gonzalez go to movies and restaurants together, talk at

night together. A Detroit Pistons basketball game was another special outing for Johnson, Olivera, Maria Maciel and her host, Mercy's Karen Fields of Detroit.

"Anabel and I are finding how similar our families are," said Garagiola, a Bloomfield Hills resident. "It's remarkable. People there are the same as they are here. The way people think about their friends, relationships."

Mission statement

The exchange grew out of the Mercy religious community's commitment to support each

country's cultural experiences. Sisters in both countries deal with totally different ministerial challenges.

"We saw this as an excellent opportunity for girls from both continents to experience each other's culture, make new friends and advance their understanding of the language," said Sister Sara Foster, the Argentine coordinator.

The language issue is important, said Mercy Spanish teacher Mary Ann Polakowski, because the Spanish spoken by Argentinians is different than what she teaches to her students. "It's

really important that we get to know each other on a curricular level."

Indications are that the schools will continue their unique communication link. In June, the Americans will go to Argentina for another six-week exchange.

"What these students will do in Argentina is to go where the poor live and see what ministries (there) are doing," Sister Doelker explained. Participants must be enrolled in the third year of a language program and families are responsible for financing their child's trip.

Her recovery takes new turn: Opening pages in school books

BY TIM SMITH
STAFF WRITER

Melissa Garr is back and they're loving it at Farmington High School.

Melissa continues her comeback from last summer's near-fatal poolside mishap by attending a limited schedule of one 90-minute class per day. She will be eased back, and only as long as it does not impede her progress, school officials said.

While attending FHS, she will continue physical, occupational and speech therapy at the Rainbow Rehabilitation Center in Farmington Hills.

According to her father, Farmington Hills Fire Lt. Mike Garr, Melissa "was anxious about her return to school," but did OK her first day — other than being very tired afterward. In the classroom with the 16-year-old throughout the first week was her Rainbow Rehabilitation caseworker, Karen Khan.

"She wants to be mainstreamed and be just one of the kids," Garr added Wednesday, reiterating the family's wishes that Melissa have a low-key return. Both Garr and Melissa's mom, Susan Garr, along with Khan, principal James Myers

■ 'She wants to be mainstreamed and be just one of the kids.'

Michael Garr
—Melissa's father

and counselor Bob Crawford, want the teen to be allowed to make progress without additional attention from the media.

Melissa's return was also uplifting for classmates, faculty and those from the community who have followed her path to recovery for months.

"Everybody's thrilled," said FHS vocal music teacher Evelyn Schuette. "She's talking a mile a minute."

Schuette said Melissa will alternate between English and history classes, one per day, to avoid too much work at the start. "I sort of knew she'd be back."

Catherine Cost, assistant principal, said Melissa's ongoing recovery should be enhanced by her return to the high school, where she attended for two years before last July's tragic poolside accident at Farmington Glen Aquatic Center. On July 23,

1997, a heavy tree branch fell, for no apparent reason, striking Melissa on the head. She was knocked down to the concrete, sustained a fractured skull and went into a deep coma for more than a month.

"Being around other people will help speed her recovery," said Cost, emphasizing that Melissa will be allowed to learn at her own pace. "She'll be in a place where so many people care for her."

Several FHS students said they were happy that Melissa is back and thought her return will serve as a positive example for others, as well as unify the student body.

Even people who aren't at Farmington High are ecstatic about how Melissa improved enough to resume her studies — people such as "Uncle Jack" Curd, one of the community's elder statesmen.

"As the honorary grandfather of the Farmington Falcons Marching Band and Color Guard," Curd said Monday, "Melissa is one of my adopted granddaughters. And I couldn't be more proud of her recovery."

He called Melissa's return to health "a miracle come true for the community."

Extended learning pilot program lands on board desk for adoption

BY TIM SMITH
STAFF WRITER

A pilot program in Farmington Public Schools that provides an extended learning day for kindergartners at three early education centers could become officially adopted at Tuesday's 7:30 p.m. school board meeting.

"It's no longer a pilot program, it's tried and true," said board Vice President Cathy Webb of Educare, which is being offered this year at Hillside Elementary School and Alameda and Fairview early childhood centers.

Webb said the school board was impressed by a review of the program during last week's board meeting and expects that Educare will be continued and

possibly even expanded to Lani-gan and Wood Creek elementaries. Both of those schools have expressed interest in starting the program in 1998-99.

"We're very pleased with it as a pilot program," Webb said Friday. "And I certainly expect the board will not only continue it but expand it. We recognize there's a group of customers out there who need it."

Board adoption of the program would not eliminate the current requirement that parents pay a \$2,000 stipend to enroll their child. "The tuition would have to continue," Webb said.

According to Fairview Principal Mary Lou Somerville, interest in Educare is growing. There

are 66 children attending this year, with enough interest to enroll twice as many in 1998-99, according to a survey of parents.

But Somerville told the board that there is concern that some families might not be able to afford the program — which takes a half day of educational-based enrichment activities out on traditional half-day kindergarten.

The Educare Advisory Board, of which Somerville is a member, recently mailed a letter to businesses, churches, civic organizations and residences urging their support in the program. The letter also asked them to consider providing scholarships for some families, to "even the playing field."

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